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ABSTRACT

By comparing high school students' total English scores on the California Achievement Test (CAT) and observing differences in performance based on grade level and gender, a recent study investigated whether significant differences exist between the achievement of students taught in an English phase-elective mini-course system and the achievement of students taught in a traditional English program. Scores were examined for 162 seniors taught for four years under the traditional English program (Group A), and 146 seniors taught for four years under the phase-elective mini-course system (Group B). (Enrollments for the two groups had fallen from the original figures of 276 for grade nine traditional students and 258 for grade nine phase-elective students.) Results indicated that students in Group B achieved significantly higher mean scores on the CAT than students in Group A in all areas except language mechanics. Scores were also examined for participants at each grade level. Findings concerning gender and grade level revealed significant differences between the two groups in three areas: language expression, reading comprehension, and total English scores. The following major results were found: (1) Group B females in grade 9 had significantly higher mean scores than Group A males and females in all three areas; (2) Group B females in grade 10 had significantly higher mean scores than Group A males in all three areas; (3) findings from grade 10 were repeated in the eleventh grade; and (4) females from both groups achieved significantly higher mean scores in language expression than Group B males. (JD)

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A SUMMARY OF THE LANGUAGE ARTS ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS IN A PHASE-ELECTIVE MINI-COURSE SYSTEM AS COMPARED TO THE LANGUAGE ARTS ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS IN A TRADITIONAL PROGRAM

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A COMPARISON OF THE ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS TAUGHT HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH IN A PHASE-ELECTIVE MINI-COURSE SYSTEM AS OPPOSED TO THOSE TAUGHT HIGH-SCHOOL ENGLISH IN A TRADITIONAL PROGRAM

Statement of the Problem

The problem in this study was to compare student achievement in an English phase-elective mini-course system with student achievement in an English traditional program.

As a means of structuring the problem, answers were sought to the following questions:

1. Will there be a significant difference in achievement, as measured by total English scores and each English subscore on the California Achievement Test, of students taught high-school English in a phase-elective mini-course system and those taught high-school English in a traditional program?

2. Will there be significant differences in total English or English subscores on the California Achievement Test between students taught in a traditional high school English program and students taught English in a phase-elective mini-course program when the variables of gender and grade level are considered?

Rationale

Secondary education in America is beginning to make some vital changes. Many of these are focused on student freedom of choice in high school courses. One such change is the revamping of traditionally required nine-month English courses into short elective subjects designed within a specified framework. These courses offer greater relevance in content, greater variety in subject matter, and more flexibility in yearly scheduling.

The first action toward this change in English curricula took place at the International Dartmouth Conference in 1966. There participants discussed the creation of a "new English" program which would involve learners creatively in choosing and shaping their own learning experiences. Albert H. Marckwardt in The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary Principals concluded from the Dartmouth experience, "If there is a 'new English,' it is to be found by re-examining and re-interpreting the child's experiences in language rather than by introducing new content as has been characteristic of curricular change in other school subjects."[1] Although not all participants agreed with Marckwardt's view that new content was not relevant to the "new English," the general consensus after the Dartmouth convention was that re-vamping the traditional English curriculum into phase-elective mini-courses would be the most significant step in this major innovation.

Since the Dartmouth conference the phase-elective English curriculum has been widely adopted in secondary schools. Statistically, however, test results have not shown much significant difference in achievement in students participating in the innovative program. To date, the most conclusive source of research about these short-course electives is George Hillock's Alternatives in English: A Critical Appraisal of Elective Programs. This report was based on a national survey in 1971 of seventy-six program descriptions from school systems in thirty-seven states. A collection of student responses on scaled questionnaire items was the most common mode of evaluation.[2]

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[1]Albert H. Marckwardt, "The Dartmouth Seminar," NASSP Bulletin (April, 1967):105.

[2]George Hillock, Jr., Alternatives in English: A Critical Appraisal of Elective Programs (Urbana, Illinois: Eric Clearinghouse, 1972), p.5.

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Hillock's study did not show any significant difference in the educational achievement of students in elective programs as opposed to those in traditional programs. It did, however, reveal an appreciable difference in student attitude. Hillock concluded that educational achievement should be measured further to cover a longer span of time and stated emphatically, "Students consider any elective program preferable to a non-elective, mandatory one."[3]

Hillock also authored another research study on phase-electives titled An Evaluation of Project APEX: A Nongraded Phase-Elective English Program. In this article Hillock compared certain aspects of APEX (Appropriate Placement for Excellence) with those of two traditional programs similar in socio-economic environment over a three-year period. The evaluation of APEX involved data on student achievement, student attitude, and differences in the faculty and curricula in the participating schools. Standarized tests and composition samples were used to measure achievement, while questionnaires, classroom experiences, and personal interviews were employed for data on attitudes, faculty, and curricula.[4]

As a result of Hillock's study, no great differences in achievement were found among the various school populations; however, the attitudes of Trenton students were found to be far more positive than those of students in the control schools. In addition, the Trenton faculty was found to be more experienced and more involved

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[3]Ibid., pp. 122-123.

[4]George Hillock, Jr., Evaluation of Project Apex: A Non-graded Phase-elective Program (Trenton, Michigan: Trenton Public Schools, 1970), pp. 12-13.

in professional activities than the other faculties, and the Trenton curriculum was found to be more extensively developed than the documents of the control schools. Thus, Hillock concluded that the Project Apex curriculum was indeed a significant achievement and one which should serve as a model for other schools in the future.[5]

Since Project Apex very few research studies on phase-elective mini-courses have surfaced, and those that have have revealed little significant difference between traditional and elective programs. Childrey, however, defended the innovative curriculum by giving one of the best summaries of phase-electives to date. He reported that it was clear that most research in this area consistently reported no significant differences between the two programs, but it also did not report that the students in elective programs did more poorly than those in traditional ones. Futhermore, he maintained that the very positive attitudes of students and teachers toward this program should be sufficient evidence to warrant its continued existence.[6]

Procedure

The first group selected for this study was the 1984 graduating class at the senior high school. They were chosen for this experiment because they were the last class to be taught four years of English under the traditional English program.

As freshmen, this group was tracked by the principal into track one (above-average), track two (average), and track three (below-average) classes. The students were tracked on the basis of their

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[5]Ibid., p. 121.

[6]John Childrey, "A Student Opinionnaire to Assess Attitudes Toward the English Phase-elective Curriculum," Indiana English Journal 2 (Fall, 1976):31.

English scores on their eighth-grade California Achievement Test. During each year of high school these students remained in their assigned groups and were taught English with all its components integrated within each group.

Students from this class who scored above the eighty-fifth percentile on their eighth-grade English CAT test were eliminated from the study. The reason for this elimination was that students in this percentile category did not participate in the comparative phase-elective program; instead, they took three years of Honors English and one year of Advanced Placement.

The second group selected for this study was the 1986 graduating class at the senior high school. These students were chosen for the experiment because they were the first class to be taught four years of English under the phase-elective mini-course system.

As freshmen these students were given the opportunity to enter either the regular college-bound program or the noncollege-bound program. Throughout their four years in high school they continued to elect mini-courses within their program, all of which were taught with focus on certain English components.

Students from this class who scored above the eighty-fifth percentile on their eighth-grade English CAT test were eliminated from this study. The reason for this elimination was that these students did not participate in the phase-elective mini-course program; instead, they took three years of Honors English and one year of Advanced Placement.

Although all students in each class who scored below the eighty-fifth percentile on the eighth-grade CAT test were tested, the number

of participants in each class varied at each grade level. This difference was attributed to dropouts, transfers, absentees, and retention in certain grades.

In the ninth grade 276 students, 129 males and 147 females, participated in the traditional study, and 258 students, 120 males and 138 females, participated in the phase-elective program. On the tenth-grade level there were 238 students, 122 males and 116 females, in the traditional group and 231 students, 105 males and 126 females, in the phase-elective program.

In the eleventh grade 192 students, 108 males and 84 females participated in the traditional study, and 172 students, 87 males and 85 females, participated in the phase-elective program. On the twelfth-grade level there were 162 students, 96 males and 66 females, in the traditional group and 146 students, 78 males and 68 females, in the phase-elective program.

The instrument used to measure achievement in this study was the level 19, 1977, McGraw-Hill version of the California Achievement Test. Data were gathered from students at each grade level to determine if significant differences existed in total English scores and the English subscale scores of language mechanics, language expression, reading vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

Analysis of variance was used to determine if there were any significant differences in achievement at the .05 significance level. The Scheffe test was used to determine exactly where the predicted differences existed.

Findings

Results of the analysis indicated that students in the phase-elective program achieved significantly higher means than students

in the traditional program in all areas except language mechanics. When the gender variable was considered, the following significant differences were found:

1. In the ninth grade significant differences in mean scores were found in language expression, reading comprehension, and total English. Specifically, phase-elective females had significantly higher means than both traditional males and females in all three areas, along with having a significantly higher mean score than phase-elective males in total English. In addition, phase-elective males had significantly higher means than traditional females in language expression and significantly higher means than traditional males in reading comprehension.

2. In the tenth grade significant differences were found in language expression, reading comprehension, and total English. Specifically, phase-elective females had significantly higher mean scores than traditional males in all three areas and also had significantly greater means than traditional females in reading comprehension. In addition, phase-elective males had significantly higher means than traditional males in reading comprehension.

3. In the eleventh grade significant differences were found in reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and total English. In all three areas, phase-elective females achieved significantly higher mean scores than traditional males.

4. In the twelfth grade significant differences were found in language expression, reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and total English. Phase-elective and traditional females achieved significantly higher means in language expression than phase-elective males, but significant differences in the other areas could not be identified by a Scheffe post hoc test.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF ACHIEVEMENT IN THE TRADITIONAL ENGLISH PROGRAM AND THE PHASE-ELECTIVE MINI-COURSE SYSTEM

ACHIEVEMENT AREAS	TRADITIONAL			PHASE-ELECTIVE			F RATIO
	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	
Language Mechanics	868	17.17	4.54	807	16.89	4.29	1.58
Language Expression	868	23.40	6.95	807	24.99	6.46	23.46*
Reading Vocabulary	868	17.40	5.92	807	18.19	6.04	7.30*
Reading Comprehension	868	21.53	7.00	807	23.85	7.63	42.20*
Total English	868	79.20	19.40	807	83.87	20.10	23.36*

*Significant at .05 level ($F \geq 3.84$ 1, 1673 df)

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF NINTH-GRADE ACHIEVEMENT IN THE TRADITIONAL ENGLISH PROGRAM AND THE PHASE-ELECTIVE MINI-COURSE SYSTEM WHEN GENDER VARIABLE IS ALSO CONSIDERED

ACHIEVEMENT AREAS	TRADITIONAL						PHASE-ELECTIVE						F RATIO
	MALE			FEMALE			MALE			FEMALE			
	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	
Language Mechanics	129	16.47	4.81	147	15.63	3.91	120	15.63	4.27	138	16.48	4.36	1.71
Language Expression	129	20.47	5.59	147	20.17	6.75	120	22.63	6.41	138	23.96	6.33	11.32*
Reading Vocabulary	129	17.88	5.69	147	17.01	6.31	120	17.38	5.43	138	18.71	6.85	2.01
Reading Comprehension	129	18.60	5.88	147	20.31	7.49	120	21.83	8.42	138	23.61	7.29	11.40*
Total English	129	73.16	18.18	147	72.37	16.65	120	75.99	16.53	138	82.76	17.01	10.59*

*Significant at .05 level ($F \geq 2.60$ 3, 530 df)

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF TENTH-GRADE ACHIEVEMENT IN THE TRADITIONAL ENGLISH PROGRAM AND THE PHASE-ELECTIVE MINI-COURSE SYSTEM WHEN GENDER VARIABLE IS ALSO CONSIDERED

ACHIEVEMENT AREAS	TRADITIONAL						PHASE-ELECTIVE						
	MALE			FEMALE			MALE			FEMALE			
	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	F RATIO
Language Mechanics	122	17.82	4.36	116	17.80	4.23	105	16.77	3.25	126	17.71	3.94	1.74
Language Expression	122	21.65	6.35	116	23.26	7.37	105	23.59	5.36	126	24.87	4.88	5.90*
Reading Vocabulary	122	17.83	5.56	116	18.46	4.88	105	18.52	3.96	126	19.37	4.88	2.07
Reading Comprehension	122	20.95	6.13	116	21.30	5.87	105	23.10	5.62	126	24.13	4.87	8.66*
Total English	122	77.75	19.52	116	80.39	16.73	105	83.23	18.60	126	86.07	13.49	5.36*

*Significant at .05 level ($F \geq 2.60$ 3, 465 df)

TABLE 4

COMPARISON OF ELEVENTH-GRADE ACHIEVEMENT IN THE TRADITIONAL ENGLISH PROGRAM AND THE PHASE-ELECTIVE MINI-COURSE SYSTEM WHEN GENDER VARIABLE IS ALSO CONSIDERED

ACHIEVEMENT AREAS	TRADITIONAL						PHASE-ELECTIVE						F RATIO
	MALE			FEMALE			MALE			FEMALE			
	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	
Language Mechanics	108	17.04	3.68	84	18.25	3.23	87	16.80	4.96	85	17.22	4.36	2.09
Language Expression	108	25.74	5.53	84	26.45	5.01	87	26.89	7.83	85	27.47	6.15	1.33
Reading Vocabulary	108	14.88	5.87	84	17.32	5.34	87	17.18	7.03	85	18.24	6.82	5.14*
Reading Comprehension	108	22.09	6.69	84	23.70	5.92	87	23.56	9.23	85	26.56	8.00	5.70*
Total English	108	79.75	15.67	84	85.73	15.36	87	84.44	26.13	85	89.49	22.80	3.79*

*Significant at .05 level ($F \geq 2.60$ 3, 360 df)

TABLE 5

COMPARISON OF TWELFTH-GRADE ACHIEVEMENT IN THE TRADITIONAL ENGLISH PROGRAM AND THE PHASE-ELECTIVE MINI-COURSE SYSTEM WHEN GENDER VARIABLE IS ALSO CONSIDERED

ACHIEVEMENT AREAS	TRADITIONAL						PHASE-ELECTIVE						F RATIO
	MALE			FEMALE			MALE			FEMALE			
	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	N	MEANS	SD	
Language Mechanics	96	17.00	5.48	66	18.70	6.04	78	16.88	4.67	68	18.37	4.11	2.44
Language Expression	96	25.91	7.25	66	28.48	6.83	78	24.92	6.68	68	28.22	6.49	4.78*
Reading Vocabulary	96	17.13	6.67	66	19.35	6.30	78	16.60	5.99	68	18.94	7.05	3.15*
Reading Comprehension	96	23.11	8.36	66	25.39	7.84	78	23.19	8.67	68	26.25	8.52	2.70*
Total English	96	83.15	24.10	66	91.92	23.69	78	81.60	22.18	68	91.78	24.10	4.09*

*Significant at .05 level ($F \geq 2.60$ 3, 304 df)

TABLE 6

RESULTS OF SCHEFFE TEST COMPARING ACHIEVEMENT FOR FOUR METHOD X GENDER GROUPS IN NINTH GRADE IN AREAS SHOWING STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

ACHIEVEMENT AREAS	DIFFERENCES SHOWN IN SCHEFFE TEST
Language Expression	PF > TF, TM; PM > TF
Reading Comprehension	PF > TF, TM; PM > TM
Total English	PF > PM, TM, TF

TABLE 7

RESULTS OF SCHEFFE TEST COMPARING ACHIEVEMENT FOR FOUR METHOD X GENDER GROUPS IN TENTH GRADE IN AREAS SHOWING STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

ACHIEVEMENT AREAS	DIFFERENCES SHOWN IN SCHEFFE TEST
Language Expression	PF > TM
Reading Comprehension	PF > TM, TF; PM > TM
Total English	PF > TM

TM = Traditional Males
TF = Traditional Females
PM = Phase-elective Males
PF = Phase-elective Females

TABLE 8

RESULTS OF SCHEFFE TEST COMPARING ACHIEVEMENT FOR FOUR METHOD X GENDER GROUPS IN ELEVENTH GRADE IN AREAS SHOWING STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

ACHIEVEMENT AREAS	DIFFERENCES SHOWN IN SCHEFFE TEST
Reading Vocabulary	PF > TM
Reading Comprehension	PF > TM
Total English	PF > TM

TABLE 9

RESULTS OF SCHEFFE TEST COMPARING ACHIEVEMENT FOR FOUR METHOD X GENDER GROUPS IN TWELFTH GRADE IN AREAS SHOWING STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

ACHIEVEMENT AREAS	DIFFERENCES SHOWN IN SCHEFFE TEST
Language Expression	PF > PM; TF > PM

TM = Traditional Males
TF = Traditional Females
PM = Phase-elective Males
PF = Phase-elective Females

Conclusions

The results of this investigation appear to warrant the following conclusions concerning whether changing an English curriculum resulted in better performance by students in the cognitive domain:

1. Data revealed that students who had participated in the phase-elective program for four years achieved significantly higher mean scores in language expression, reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and total English than students who had been in the traditional English program all during high school. When the gender variable was considered at the twelfth-grade level, these significant differences still appeared. Since the data revealed higher mean scores for females, as opposed to males, in all areas and significantly higher language expression means of both phase-elective and traditional females as opposed to traditional males, one can conclude that the significant differences found were probably due to the fact that past research has found that females achieve higher scores in English than males.

2. The instructional method did not alter achievement in language mechanics significantly.

3. Females achieved more in the phase-elective program than males.

4. The mean scores in almost all areas increased with each grade level, thus revealing a growth in English knowledge throughout high-school, regardless of the instructional method.

5. The phase-elective program was more effective in producing higher mean scores in language expression and reading comprehension than in language mechanics and reading vocabulary.

6. Although past research reported no significant difference in achievement of students in a phase-elective mini-course system and students in a traditional program, this study found that the phase-elective system produced significantly higher means in language expression, reading vocabulary, reading comprehension, and total English. This finding adds to the results reported by Childrey which indicated that the phase-elective program produced positive attitudes of students and teachers, which was, by itself, sufficient evidence to warrant the program's continued existence.

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GRADE	COLLEGE-BOUND	NONCOLLEGE-BOUND
9	English Language Freshman Literature	Fundamental English I Fundamental English II
10	Requirement Composition Elective (one) Introduction to Literature Creative Writing Mythology Shakespeare	Requirement Practical English Grammar Elective (one) Reading for Pleasure Basic Literature
11	Requirement American Literary Heritage Elective (one) Advanced Grammar Any 10th Grade Elective	Requirement Vocational English Grammar Elective (one) Readings in American Literature Any 10th Grade Elective
12	English Literary Heritage I English Literary Heritage II	English Essentials I English Essentials II